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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the nature and extent of African American interest in African languages. Data were gathered in (1) an informal telephone survey of selected universities having an African American studies department and/or a sizeable number of Black students, and African-centered public schools, and (2) a survey of 234 African Americans and others at 3 universities, 1 college, and 1 church. The first part of the study resulted in a list of 19 schools and colleges offering African languages; the list is included here. The study's second part found about 10 percent of respondents had studied an African language, with Swahili being the most commonly studied language. Little gender difference in language study was found. Almost three-quarters of respondents who had not studied an African language wished to do so, a greater proportion of women (80 percent) than men (60 percent). Here again, Swahili was the preferred language to study. A complete list of languages respondents wished to study is included. The most common reason for undertaking African language study was interest in African cultural heritage. Age, gender, and income were all found to be factors in African language interest; data are presented. It is concluded that the study indicates significant interest in learning African languages. (MSE)

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FROM "HUJAMBO" TO "MOLO": STUDY OF AND INTEREST IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

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INTRODUCTION

What is Africa to me
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black,
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

--Countee Cullen, "Heritage," 1925

Thus Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen problematized the relationship of U.S. Blacks to Africa as that relationship was constructed in the 1920's. Since that time, though, and particularly since the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960's and 1970's, Africa has exploded into the national consciousness of African Americans. This "explosion" has resulted in calls for the rediscovery of our African roots, the study of African history and culture, and the learning of African languages. Further, the hiatus in Black political activism during the Reagan-Bush years of the 1980's has been replaced by a renewed mood of activism and African-Centeredness among Black youth, particularly in the universities and in Rap/Hip Hop Culture of urban Black youth. This paper explores the nature and extent of the contemporary focus on Africa as manifested in African Americans' study of and interest in African languages.

Two kinds of findings will be presented: 1)preliminary institutional data on the teaching of African languages in selected universities and African-Centered public schools; 2)results of a

pilot survey of African Americans about interest in studying African languages.

INSTITUTIONAL DATA

An informal poll, via telephone inquiry, was taken of universities and public schools during April and May, 1996. The universities were selected on the basis of having major African American Studies departments and/or large numbers of Black students. My reasoning was that if African Americans are studying African languages anywhere, it would be in educational institutions with a significant Black presence--i.e., in terms of numbers or courses offered.

The universities were selected on the basis of having a major African American Studies Department and/or a sizable number of Black students. The public schools selected were those with African-Centered curricula and/or districts in cities with large Black populations. This listing is in no way intended to be complete. Rather, it is based on a random telephone poll of institutions and key persons at those institutions who are known to the researcher and is intended to give a preliminary picture of the teaching of African languages in sites with a significant African American presence (either in number of persons or intellectual curricular content). These data provide the basis for further, more systematic study.

Though admittedly preliminary at this juncture, the results of this informal poll are varied, even within the same locales. (See Table One.) For example, some of the public school districts with

major Black student enrollments offer no African languages at all--e.g., the Chicago and the New York Public Schools. However, Chicago State University, located in the city of Chicago, with a predominantly Black student body, offers both Wolof and Twi through its Afro American Studies department. And in Englewood, California, just outside Los Angeles, author Olatunde Shoroye is conducting a successful national marketing campaign with his Yoruba Without Tears text book, complete with audio tapes, available through mail order for $49.99.

PILOT SURVEY

A questionnaire was designed to tap African Americans' study of and interest in learning African languages. The survey posed such questions as whether or not the respondent had undertaken previous study of an African language, the method of studying that language, reasons for wanting to study an African language, and of course, the preferred language to be studied. The surveys were distributed in five locations: 1)Michigan State University (East Lansing, Michigan); 2)Wayne State University (Detroit, Michigan); 3)Governors' State University (Chicago, Illinois); 4)Medgar Evers College (Brooklyn, New York); and 5)Tennessee Missionary Baptist Church (Detroit). A total of 234 surveys were returned.

Description of the Pilot Sample

Racially, the sample was overwhelmingly African American (86%), with 2% Latino and 12% white respondents. In terms of gender, 71.8% of the respondents were female, 28.2% were males. Since many of the respondents were university students, 51.4% of

the sample were in the age group 18-25; 21% were 26-35; 16.4% were 36-49; 7% were 50 years of age or above, and 2.8% were below 18 years of age. Relative to income, 30.9% were in the bracket of $50,000 or above; 24.5% earned $12,000 or under; 17.6% in the income group of $12,000-$25,000; and 27.1% earned between $25,000 and $50,000. The sample was comprised of 81.5% students and 18.5% non-students. Almost half of this latter group had completed high school (45.2%), and a fourth (25.8%) had a Bachelor's degree. The students were primarily undergraduates on all levels.

Results

Out of the 234 respondents, only 10.3% had studied an African language previously. The language most frequently studied was Kiswahili. (See Table Two.) The figure of 10.3% is useful as a point of "minimal awareness"; that is, it establishes base line data that could be used to measure the success of "HUJAMBO TO MOLO" (our African language campaign in the U.S.). Further, the 10.3% figure is encouraging, given that the U.S. is known for its intolerance of any language other than English. (In fact, there is a joke popular among U.S. progressives which goes as follows. What do you call a person who speaks three languages? Answer: Trilingual. What do you call a person who speaks two languages? Answer: Bilingual. What do you call a person who speaks one language? Answer: American.)

Despite the large number of women in the sample, there was little gender difference in terms of previous study of an African language. Of the male respondents, 9.7% had studied an African

language before, almost identical to the 9.5% figure for females in the sample.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents who had NOT previously studied an African language desired to do so: 74.9 percent answered "definitely yes" or "yes" to this question. While there was no gender distinction in terms of having previously studied an African language, this did not prove to be the case in terms of interest in first-time study of an African language. In this instance, 80.8% of the female respondents answered in the affirmative compared to only 60% of the males in the sample. This disparity may be attributable to the oft-noted observation that African American women tend to be less socially conservative and to identify less with the status quo than African American men, who are more often concerned with the mundane realities of earning a living and the pragmatics of survival in America.

Both for those who had studied an African language previously and for those interested in first-time study of an African language, Kiswahili, which many linguists consider the African lingua franca, was the dominant language chosen, accounting for 40% of those who had previously studied an African language, and 54.6% of the responses from those who would constitute first-time students of an African language. Other languages mentioned were Wolof, Hausa, Zulu, and Yoruba. A complete list of the African languages respondents desired to study appears in Table Three. Finally, it says something positive about interest in African languages that many respondents indicated that they wanted to study

an African language although they did not know which language. This group accounted for 22.7% of the responses to the question of the preferred African language to study.

Respondents were asked to explain their reason for wanting to study an African language. The majority--41.9%--indicated cultural linkage with Africa as the reason. Some of the other reasons given were to fulfill a university foreign language requirement, to increase personal knowledge, to use the language to open a business, and to get a job in Africa. The least frequently cited reason was the influence of the respondent's peers, which accounted for only 4.1% of the responses.

In terms of income, those in the category of $12,000 to $25,000 had the greatest number of positive responses to the desire for first-time study of an African language. 87.1% of this group said "definitely yes" or "yes" in answer to this question. The income group with the greatest number of "no" responses to this question was the $25,000-$50,000 group; here, 26% said no. This difference in response by income group may stem from the fact that lower income Black groups have far less investment in and generally exhibit less identification with the thought patterns and values of the White American mainstream.

As mentioned, the largest number of respondents were in the 18 to 25-year-old category, not surprising since the survey was conducted among university students. A large percentage of this group--76.7%-- expressed interest in African language study while the above 50 age group had the greatest percentage of negative

responses--28.6% As in the case of Black women and lower income Black groups, this disparity in response by age is probably attributable to the fact that younger African Americans are less socially conservative and identify less with the social conventions and norms of the (dominant) European American culture.

In terms of the method of learning an African language, respondents were given the following choices:

university class for grade (i.e., A, 4.0, etc.)

university class for pass/fail grade

university no-credit class, reduced fees

private tutor

summer intensive course (e.g., 5 hrs./day)

community center or church

program of study in Africa

The preferred method of study was for a university grade; the least preferred method was a summer intensive program. Age seemed to influence the preferred method, with the 18-25 and 26-35 age groups preferring study for a university grade, whereas the 36-49 age group preferred study in Africa, and the 50+ age group preferred study for no-credit with reduced fees.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Future work on this project will need to address the methodological shortcomings inherent in paper-and-pencil, randomly administered surveys. Triangulation could be very useful, combining surveys with focus groups and in-person interviews. The instrument needs refining and polishing to avoid confusion on the

part of respondents who may have to complete it without the benefit of a trained interviewer present.

The preliminary institutional data presented here indicate that in sites of deliberate African-Centered consciousness, African language study prevails. These data also point toward the need for such consciousness relative to embracing and promoting African language/culture. That is, black skin color is an insufficient index of identification with Africa and African languages, as indicated by the poll of predominantly Black public school districts which offer no African languages at all.

The preliminary pilot survey results indicate that there is enthusiastic interest in African language study, particularly among African American youth, African American women, and African Americans in the lower income category. Further, these groups appear to be constructing language on more than functional grounds as they indicate cultural linkage with Africa as the central reason for such language study and thus provide a 1990's affirmative answer to Countee Cullen's 1920's query, "What is Africa to me?"

This research project is premised on the conceptualization of language as culture, identity and ideology. Learning an African language is not conceived of as an end in itself but as an avenue for African Americans to rediscover ourselves through the power of language and as a bridge between Africans in the U.S. and those on the Continent. While the preliminary nature of the data preclude drawing firm conclusions at this time, this study has served to illluminate the language issue and to generate hypotheses for

critically assessing the study of and interest in African languages among African Americans.

TABLE ONE
AFRICAN LANGUAGES TAUGHT AT SELECTED UNIVERSITIES AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS WITH A SIZABLE BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT AND/OR A MAJOR BLACK STUDIES DEPARTMENT

INSTITUTION	BLK. STUDENTS	BLK. STUDIES	LANGUAGE (S)
Aisha Shule (charter* primary school, Detroit)	X	N.A.	Kiswahili (elem. inter., adv.)
New Concept (private primary school, Chicago)	X	N.A.	Kiswahili phrases used, but not taught as subject
University of Massachusetts-Amherst	N.A.	X	Selfinstructional Kiswahili, thru Foreign Lang. Resource Center
Sankofa Shule (charter primary school, Lansing, Michigan	X	N.A.	Kiswahili**
Albany State University, New York	N.A.	X	Yoruba
Hunter College, New York	X	X	Yoruba;Kiswahili; ancient Egyptian
City University of New York	X	X	Kiswahili; Yoruba
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	N.A.	X	Kiswahili (elem. inter.)
California State University-Northridge	X	X	Kiswahili until 2 yrs. ago;cut due to funding
Wayne State University, Detroit	X	X	Kiswahili (elem. inter., adv.)
Temple University,			

Philadelphia	X	X***	Kiswahili;Hausa; Yoruba;ancient Egyptian
California State University-Long Beach	X	X	Kiswahili(elem. inter.)
Malcolm X Academy, Detroit Public primary school	X	N.A.	Kiswahili****
New York City Public Schools	X	N.A.	None
Martin Luther King Jr. High School, special foreign language public school in Detroit	X	N.A.	None
Chicago State University	X	X	Wolof;Twi
Chicago Public Schools	X	N.A.	None
Los Angeles Public Schools	X	N.A.	None*****
Ohio State University	N.A.	X	Kiswahili;Hausa; Yoruba; Zulu

*Charter schools are public schools organized by private individuals, independent of public school districts, that receive funding from state governments providing they comply with state directives. Aisha Shule is a former Black private school that was transformed when Michigan's charter school law went into effect. Sankofa Shule is a newly organized Black charter school. Presently, only six states have laws allowing wide latitude in the establishment of charter schools (Michigan, Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Minnesota).

**Sankofa Shule also teaches Japanese and French.

***Temple University's African American Studies Department, under the leadership of Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, is the only department in the U.S. that offers the Ph.D. in African American Studies.

****Malcolm X Academy, a predominantly Black male school, also offers Spanish.

*****Although the L.A. School District offers no African languages, it has the only African American Language Program in the country.

TABLE TWO
AFRICAN LANGUAGE STUDIED PREVIOUSLY

LANGUAGE	PERCENT OF RESPONSE
Kiswahili	40.0
Hausa	5.0
Krio	5.0
Tigrinya	5.0
Akan	5.0
Amharic	5.0
Yoruba	10.0
Xhosa	5.0
Other	20.0*
Total	100.0

*This category includes languages given by respondents which are not indigenous to Africa--e.g., Arabic, African American Language.

TABLE THREE
PREFERRED AFRICAN LANGUAGE TO STUDY

LANGUAGE	PERCENT OF RESPONSES
Kiswahili	54.6
"Ashanti"	5.0
Hausa	4.2
Wolof	3.4
Krio	3.4
Yoruba	2.5
Zulu	1.7
Mende	.8
"Nubian"	.8
"West African"	.8
Don't Know	22.7
Total	100.0

TABLE FOUR
INTEREST IN STUDYING AFRICAN LANGUAGE BY AGE, GENDER, INCOME

	PERCENT YES	PERCENT NO	PERCENT NOT SURE
AGE:			
18 - 25 YEARS	76.7	18.4	4.9
26 - 35 YEARS	76.2	14.3	9.5
36 - 49 YEARS	71.4	14.3	14.3
50+ YEARS	71.4	28.6	0.0
GENDER:			
Female	80.8	12.6	6.6
Male	60.0	28.3	11.7
INCOME:			
$12,000 or under	76.2	16.7	7.1
$12,000 - $25,000	87.1	6.5	6.5
$25,000 - $50,000	68.0	26.0	6.0
$50,000 and above	75.4	17.5	7.0